Saratoga

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The Surrender of Gen. Burgoyne at Saratoga, New York, 17 October 1777, by John Trumbull.
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"I have always thought Hudson's River the most proper part of the whole continent for opening vigorous operations. Because the course of the river, so beneficial for conveying all the bulky necessaries of an army, is precisely the route that an army ought to take for the great purposes of cutting the communications between the Southern and Northern Provinces, giving confidence to the Indians, and securing a junction with the Canadian forces."
—Gen. John Burgoyne, 1775.

General John Burgoyne, by Sir Joshua Reynolds. © The Frick Collection, New York

The Campaign of 1777

Gen. John Burgoyne's belief in the importance of the Hudson River as a strategic highway through the northeast never wavered from the moment he arrived in America in 1775. It became the centerpiece of his plan for the British northern campaign of 1777, which called for his army to move south from Canada along the Lake Champlain-Hudson River route to Albany. A smaller force under Col. Barry St. Leger was expected to support this movement by marching east from Lake Ontario into the upper Mohawk Valley. Burgoyne and St. Leger would meet at Albany and join forces with Sir William Howe, who headquartered in New York City with a sizable army of his own. Together they would make a concerted effort to quell the rebellion.

But Howe had other ideas. Leaving only a small force under Sir Henry Clinton in New York, he planned to move the rest of his army against Philadelphia, the patriot capital, by way of Chesapeake Bay. Colonial Secretary George Germain approved the movement in the belief that Sir William would return to New York in time to cooperate with Burgoyne. Howe was already at sea and deeply committed to the Philadelphia campaign when he received Germain's endorsement, thus making the troops best positioned to help Burgoyne unavailable in the required numbers. Without a strong supporting force, Burgoyne's army could become an isolated column in a vast and hostile wilderness.

Burgoyne embarked from St. Johns (now St. Jean), Canada, on June 17, 1777, with a total force of some 9,000 men, including about 4,200 British regulars, 4,000 German troops, and nearly 1,000 loyalists, Indians, Canadians, and camp followers. His first major objective, Fort Ticonderoga on Lake Champlain, fell on July 6, after a four-day siege. Moving on south through Skenesboro and Fort Edward, the British were impeded by rough terrain and the delaying tactics of Gen. Philip Schuyler, then commanding American troops in the Northern Department charged with halting Burgoyne's advance.

Time and the tide of events now began to run against Burgoyne. St. Leger halted his advance down the Mohawk Valley to besiege Fort Stanwix. In the Battle of Oriskany on August 6 he stopped an American column marching to aid the fort. But learning that a strong force under Gen. Benedict Arnold was on its way, he raised the siege and retreated toward Canada. Even more serious was the fate of a detachment of men Burgoyne sent to Bennington. On August 16 John Stark's and Seth Warner's New England militia shattered this force, inflicting about 900 casualties.

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Major General Horatio Gates, by Charles Wilson Peale.

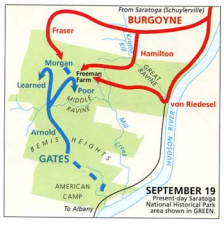
Despite these setbacks, Burgoyne decided to sever his communications with Canada and risk everything on a push to Albany. On September 13, he crossed to the west bank of the Hudson at Saratoga (now Schuylerville) and began marching southward. Four miles north of the village of Stillwater, the British force came upon the Americans, 9,000 strong. In command now was Gen. Horatio Gates, who had replaced Schuyler. The Americans were entrenched on Bemis Heights, a strong position where the road to Albany squeezed through a defile between the hills and the river, as does today's U.S. 4.

American artillery on the heights and in redoubts along the Hudson commanded the river and the road. Col. Thaddeus Kosciuszko, a Polish military engineer serving with the Americans, had chosen and fortified the site. Burgoyne's heavily burdened army had either to run the gauntlet between the hills and the river, thus risking destruction, or drive the Americans out of their fortifications on the heights. The British general chose to fight.

The Battles of Saratoga

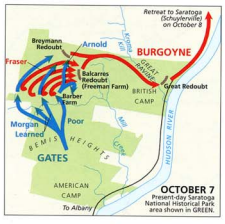
On September 19 the Royal army advanced upon the **American camp** in three separate columns. Two headed through the heavy forests covering the region; the third, composed of German troops, marched down the river road. American scouts detected Burgoyne's army in motion and notified Gates, who ordered Col. Daniel Morgan's corps of Virginia and Pennsylvania riflemen to track the British march. About 12:30 p.m., some of Morgan's men brushed with the advance guard of Burgoyne's center column in a clearing known as the **Freeman Farm**, about a mile north of the American camp.

The battle that followed swayed back and forth over the farm for more than three hours. Then, as the British lines began to waver in the face of the deadly fire of the numerically superior Americans, German reinforcements arrived from the river road. Hurling them against the American right, Burgoyne steadied the wavering British line and gradually forced the Americans to withdraw. Except for this timely arrival and the near exhaustion of the Americans' ammunition, Burgoyne might have been defeated that day.



Though he held the immediate field of battle, Burgoyne had been stopped about a mile north of the American line and his army roughly treated. Shaken by his victory, the British commander ordered his troops to entrench in the vicinity of the Freeman Farm and await support from Clinton, who was supposedly preparing to move north toward Albany from New York City. For nearly three weeks he waited, but Clinton did not come.

By now Burgoyne's situation was critical. Faced by a growing American army without hope of help from the south, and with supplies rapidly diminishing, the British army became weaker with each passing day. Burgoyne had to choose between advancing or retreating. He decided to risk a second engagement, and on October 7 ordered a reconnaissance-in-force to test the American left flank. Ably led and supported by eight cannon, a force of 1,500 men moved out of the **British camp**.



After marching southwesterly about three-quarters of a mile, the troops deployed in a clearing on the **Barber Farm**. While most of the British front was posted in an open field, the area's topography made both flanks vulnerable to surprise attack. By now the Americans knew that Burgoyne's army was again on the move and at about 3 p.m. attacked in three columns under Colonel Morgan, Gen. Ebenezer Learned, and Gen. Enoch Poor. Repeatedly the British line was broken, then rallied, and both flanks were severely punished and driven back. Gen. Simon Fraser, who commanded the British right, was mortally wounded as he rode among his men to encourage them to make a stand and cover the developing withdrawal.

Before the enemy's flanks could be rallied, Gen. Benedict Arnold—who had been effectively relieved of command after a quarrel with Gates—rode onto the field and led Learned's brigade against the German troops holding the British center. Under tremendous pressure from all sides, the Germans joined a general withdrawal into the fortifications on the Freeman Farm. Within an hour after the opening clash, Burgoyne lost eight cannon and more than 400 officers and men.

Flushed with success, the Americans believed that victory was near. Arnold led one column in a series of savage attacks on the **Balcarres Redoubt**, a powerful British fieldwork on the Freeman Farm. After failing repeatedly to carry this position, Arnold wheeled his horse and, dashing through the crossfire of both armies, spurred northwest to the **Breymann Redoubt**. Arriving just as American troops began to assault the fortification, he joined in the final surge that overwhelmed the German soldiers defending the work. Upon entering the redoubt, he was wounded in the leg. Had he died there, posterity would have known few names brighter than that of Benedict Arnold.

Darkness ended the day's fighting and saved Burgoyne's army from immediate disaster. That night the British commander left his campfires burning and withdrew his troops behind the **Great Redoubt**, which protected the high ground and river flats at the northeast corner of the battlefield. The next night, October 8, after burying General Fraser in the redoubt, the British began their retreat north. They had suffered 1,000 casualties in the past three weeks; American losses were fewer than 500.

After a miserable march in mud and rain, Burgoyne's troops took refuge in a fortified camp on the heights of Saratoga. There an American force that had grown to nearly 17,000 men surrounded the exhausted British army. Faced with such overwhelming numbers, Burgoyne surrendered on October 17, 1777. By the terms of the Convention of Saratoga, Burgoyne's depleted army, some 6,000 men, marched out of its camp "with the Honors of War" and grounded its muskets along the west bank of the Hudson River. Thus was gained one of the most decisive victories in American and world history.